

Chapter One: Story for a Sleepy Child

Behind the clouds, at the end of the sky, is a large round room of doors. Each door is unique, coming in different shapes and colors and with different symbol door-markers. The ceiling is high, and in the middle of the floor is a dark glass circle called The Eye.

The room was empty.

In the perfect silence, came the quiet sound of a door swinging open. The door was lavender colored, and very heavy, yet had somehow been impossibly opened by the small person standing in the doorway. It was a little girl no more than four years old. She had wispy wavy curls down to her shoulders, and her cheeks were full. She was wearing a soft white dress and a shiny purple-blue stone on a necklace that was much too long to her. On her back was a small, as of yet unusable pair of feathery black wings. Furthermore, her eyes were full of mischief.

She strolled confidently into the imposing room, and followed the wall of doors. The lavender door swung shut behind her. She came to a red door, and pushed at it, without effect. A smaller door with a golden sun emblazoned upon it refused to open as well, and she left the doors alone. She went to the center of the room, and noticed the dark glass. Her eyes lit up; she'd seen windows on walls and even on ceilings before, but never on the floor. The little girl wanted to know what she would see through such a window, but unfortunately the glass was much too dark.

She plopped down on the floor, took her shiny round stone off from around her neck and began to pound with it on the glass. Nothing happened, but she continued with determination, unaware of the fact that both her necklace and the glass window were virtually indestructible. The necklace was a casting stone, the magical device of her people. It had a neutrality spell on it, one that would be removed when she was old enough not to mistakenly blow everything up. She'd discovered it's usefulness in smashing things, however, and patiently went on pounding.

Slowly, she came to realize that another door had opened, and that she was being watched. She stopped trying to break the glass and looked up curiously. It was a tall man in a dark cloak, leaning against the side of an open doorway with his arms folded. Strangely enough, his eyes were completely black, even where the whites of his eyes should have been. He gazed at her calmly.

“What are you looking at?” the girl asked innocently. There was no attitude in the question, just curiosity.

He regarded her silently for a moment, before replying, “A girl-child with black wings and hair and Mind-Ruin’s eyes, trying to break an unbreakable god-object.”

The little girl ignored this nonsense.

“You’re one of the twins,” he stated. “Lyla, is it? Where is your mother?”

“With Lia and Grandma,” Lyla said. “Lia cries a lot, and they don’t always know when I go,” she added with satisfaction.

“Well Lyla,” said the dark-eyed man. “Would you like to come inside with me?” She nodded. “Put your pretty necklace back around your neck and come along.”

She obediently put the chain back over her head; the stone hung down as far as her waist. She got to her feet and followed the tall man through his dark blue door. Inside was an entry room with three doors, and several pictures on the wall. Lyla took a second look when she recognized her grandmother Aeyris in one of the pictures. She wanted to ask him if he knew her grandmother, but he was already through the first door, and by the time she had followed him inside the next room she had forgotten.

The room had many glass walls, through which Lyla could see the stars. She ran straight to the windows, peering through them quickly to see everything her eyes could soak up. The stars were above, and below they were reflected in what looked like dark water. In the distance Lyla could see a glowing white boat drifting gently on the

waters surface. She was startled to notice that the closer stars looked like they had faces; they were looking at her. She turned back to the dark-eyed man. A strange blue-colored fire had sprung up in the center of the room, and he had settled in a proportionately large armchair.

“Who are you?” she asked.

His face remained stoic, but his eyes smiled at her. “You may call me Grandfather,” he decided.

Lyla was delighted. She had more grandmothers than she needed, really, but this was her first grandfather. She had Grandma, who lived in the lavender room, and Aeyris, who preferred to be called by her real name but who was her mother’s mother. She also had Grandmother Liviana, who was really Grandma’s mother.

“Grandpa,” Lyla decided, and approaching him, climbed right onto his lap. He stiffened for a moment, looking down on her in surprise, but then she melted against him comfortably and he relaxed. Again, his lips twitched into an almost smile.

“Tell me a story!” the little girl pleaded immediately.

“What kind of story?” Grandfather asked amiably.

She deliberated carefully. “A good story!” she finally decided.

He chuckled, warming up to her. “Well then, a story it will be.” He began, “A long time ago, before anything existed at all, there was a terrible place called the Void. It was a cold and empty place, but it contained the pure essence of chaos. Over time, the winds of the Void stirred this essence, and it began to separate. Small portions of it began to solidify, filled with ideas and contrasts.”

It was apparent to the dark-eyed man from the wide blue-purple eyes staring up at him blankly that she didn’t understand much of what he said, but Lyla listened with rapt attention.

“Slowly, these ideas began to gain a sort of consciousness. Darkness and Nature formed first, being a natural part of the Void. In response, Light and Destruction appeared. Order came next, since it took a while for that idea to form out of pure chaos. Lastly formed was Mystery, and she never completed her separation from the Void, and still contains elements of raw, unfinished chaos. These newly awakened powerful beings became the gods as we know them today: Dark Eyes, the Green Lady, MindRuin, Wrath, the Hermit God, and Intuition. They immediately began to change their environment around them, creating their own sacred places inside the Void. The Green Lady made a Void Garden and the Hermit God made the Eternal Library. For time without description they lived so. And then one day, they wanted more; all except Intuition, who was already within her perfect element. They met in the very center of the Void, the place they call Hell.”

Lyla nodded, leaning into the crook of his arm.

“They tried to come up with new ideas. They deliberated for hours, until they were bored and drifted aimlessly, falling into a sort of sleep state. In this sleep state, they shared a dream. A dream of a planet. When they awoke, it was there in front of them; raw and empty, but formed. They immediately created a bubble to protect their new creation from the Void, and set about changing the planet to their own desires. Then they created the first people; Dark Eyes made the winged Cylants, like you. The Green Lady made the Vineadryads, and gave them four arms and vines on top of their heads. Wrath’s people, the Bloodbeasts, were very fierce, with sharp teeth and claws. The Hermit God’s people, the Centaurs, had four legs and a long tail. Intuition watched, and created no one. All of the gods created many animals and landscapes on their new planet, and when it was done they set it adrift, putting it in orbit around the center of the Void. The first planet is called Origin, because that’s where the idea of a planet began.”

“Why didn’t Intuition make peoples?” Lyla asked sleepily.

Grandfather shrugged. “I doubt anyone will ever truly know. In my own opinion, I think she didn’t like the idea of creating people from the very beginning. Of course, she created planets and creatures

eventually, but only for her own use rather than for the sake of creation. Anyway, after everyone had created planets, it occurred to the gods that they needed a way to connect the planets. The Void was fatal to mortals, it was too cold, extreme and without oxygen. So Dark Eyes changed several of his Cylants; a number of the men he made stronger, made their wings larger, and gave them the ability to go without breathing for long periods of time. Wrath put an ever-burning flame within them to keep them warm inside the Void. Dark Eyes marked them with black wings. However, things didn't go as planned, and these new Cylants were prone to madness because of Wrath's flame. So MindRuin and the Green Lady gave several of the women Cylants healing abilities, to counteract the violence of the others, who we today call Portal Guides, because they have the power to open portals through the Void. The Portal Guides were misunderstood, and called Cursed."

"Not Cursed!" Lyla protested, rousing a little. "Mommy says I'm special!"

Grandfather smiled gently. "Of course you are. There's never been a female Portal Guide before, you're very special."

"I know what happens next!" Lyla said excitedly.

"You tell the story," Grandfather offered.

"Father comes from Earth, and he saves the Portal Guides!"

"Very true," Grandfather agreed. "The Portal Guides were treated very badly by the other Cylants, and the other races, because they were feared. So a new god was born, Dark Eyes' grandson, the one they call Hell Eyes. And he and your father freed the Portal Guides and brought them to Fraizha, their own planet."

"Father killed all the Ice Lizards, too," Lyla added knowingly, eyelids half open.

"Maybe not all of them," Grandfather corrected. "But he fought in the Ice Lizard War, yes. At the same time that the Portal Guides were freed, Intuition made Ice Lizards to attack Origin. She was in pain,

and she wanted to end it. But the Ice Lizard War is over, and the other gods are helping Intuition now.”

He checked on the little girl, whose eyes had drifted shut. He waited a moment, but she seemed to be asleep. Gently, he kissed her on the top of the head and looked up at the man watching them from the doorway. The young man, who himself had a pair of large black wings, had been watching for several minutes.

“I think I like this one,” Grandfather said.

The young man crossed the room and the sleeping child was transferred into his arms.

“Enna says she didn’t think Lyla could get out of Mother’s rooms,” the young man said. “The door must have opened for her.”

“You know what that means don’t you?” Grandfather asked, and the young man nodded. “She’s got enough power to open doors at Sky’s End, at least.”

“She’s got hard times ahead of her,” the young man said. “Enna loves her dearly but I worry about Aeyris still... I don’t know if she entirely accepts that Lyla is a grandchild of hers.”

“Aeyris never really changes,” Grandfather agreed. “Why don’t you take Lyla to Fraizha?”

“I’ve been meaning to,” said the young man, “Someday soon.”

He turned to leave the room, and the door reopened for them without him touching it. Lyla and her father disappeared through it, leaving the dark-eyed man to relax by his strange, blue-flamed fire.

(Author’s note: a Prologue of sorts. Other chapters will feature a teenage Lyla, Harry and other characters. Thanks for finding Cursed Beauty!)

Chapter Two: Adventure

Lyla splashed through the stream and over the rocks, picking handfuls of flower petals on the way and throwing them before her like a grand procession. It could have been a scene in any little girl's life, except that the stream looked like liquid silver, and the flower petals were little bursts of flame. She was standing on a large, most magnificent cloud.

The castle behind her was as strange as the landscape. Her father was inside alone, her twin sister Lia hadn't wanted to come along. Lyla played by herself until she was exhausted and she settled on the edge of the cloud, letting her feet swing freely over the starry water below.

On and off, Lyla had been having an uneasy feeling, as if someone was watching her.

Perhaps it was her father, watching from a window. Where was he? Lyla twisted around to look at the cluster of single towers behind her.

For a moment, she saw a face watching from a near window. Lyla blinked, and the face was gone. Her uneasy feeling grew. It hadn't been her father's face; of that much she was sure.

Just then Lyla's father stepped through the door of the main tower, heading down the arching bridge that led down to the cloud. As he approached, Lyla decided she must have imagined the face, and she greeted her father with a smile.

"Having fun?" He asked, settling down beside her. Lyla nodded.

There was a swish of waves, and both of them looked down. A boat was moving swiftly across the waters below with a slender, elegant woman seated inside. She tilted her head back, spotting Lyla and her father on the cloud.

"Should we go say hello?" Father asked.

“Yes!” Lyla said emphatically.

The piece of cloud they sat upon suddenly came off, drifting away and separating from the cloud island. The boat stopped and waited as their little piece of cloud floated down lower and lower until it rested on the water beside the boat. Lyla jumped onto the boat, rocking it slightly, and her father followed more carefully. The cloud piece drifted away.

“Serenity,” Father said in greeting.

“Hell Eyes,” She responded. “All is well at the castle?” It seemed to Lyla that there was some hidden meaning to this, since nothing at the castle ever really changed, but she couldn’t fathom what it was.

Father nodded, and Serenity turned to smile at Lyla. “Hello Lyla.”

Lyla was used to everyone knowing her name, and smiled back. “Hi!”

“Do you want to go for a boat ride?”

“Yes, thank you!”

“Maybe we can visit an old friend,” Father suggested, and Serenity nodded.

The boat went into motion, smoothly and silently, and Lyla couldn’t help reaching over the edge to tip her fingers into the water. Her fingers dragged in the current, and Lyla immediately felt something a jolt of surprise. The water felt alive. There was something down there, below the stillness, something very wild and unrestrained.

It called to her, so Lyla left her fingers in the water.

They passed several glowing people who were floating on the water; Lyla thought it was a little odd to be taking a swim. Also, they were completely black and white with no color. They reminded Lyla of the faces she had seen through the window of her grandfather’s room.

Lyla thought Lia was silly for staying home. The Pit was boring. Where her father went, things were interesting. Stars had faces, the water was alive, flowers burned and clouds gave you rides. She got to visit her favorite grandmothers, and Grandpa was sometimes there too. This boat ride was also exciting.

The boat began to slow, and it finally came to a stop beside one of the glowing people. The glowing man sat up, and father reached out and gripped hands with him, to help him step into the boat. It was an old man with white hair that seemed somewhat unaffected by gravity.

"Harry," the old man greeted Lyla's father. "Or should I call you Hell Eyes?"

Father grinned. "Just Harry, Aadon."

Aadon turned to look at Lyla, and he smiled. "Who's this?"

"This is Lyla," Father told him.

"One of the twins," Aadon said, and Lyla frowned. "Surely the prettier one," he added.

Lyla liked him.

They spent almost an hour with Aadon, who wanted Lyla to tell him all about her and her life. He also had a more serious conversation which Lyla mostly ignored, something about a planet called Fraizha.

"Have you ever been to Fraizha, Lyla?" Aadon asked.

Lyla shook her head.

Aadon looked at Father, who shrugged. "I suppose I could make a trip."

"They would love her," Aadon said. "They're very curious about her."

"Of course," Father agreed. "What do you think, Lyla?"

“Yes!” Lyla jumped up in the boat. “Let’s go right now!” She gave Aadon a big hug. “Bye Aadon!”

Aadon laughed. “Well I see you’re in a hurry, I’ll let you be on your way.” He hugged her back, nodded in a respectful way to Father, and then turned to Serenity. To her, he bowed. Serenity smiled her mysterious smile, and Aadon climbed back over the edge of the boat. The water held his weight. He stood, bobbing slightly, so that he could wave as they began to sail away. When he was just a figure in the distance, Lyla saw him lie down. She turned to look ahead.

They didn’t go back to the castle; Lyla didn’t see it even though she looked. She searched by peering up at the clouds above but couldn’t determine which one had the castle on the upper side. Maybe it had drifted away. Father always found it again, by porting there directly.

Eventually they came to a dock with a lone door at the end. The boat came to a stop and Father stepped out, taking her hand.

“Thank you Serenity,” Father said. Serenity nodded, letting her hand rest momentarily on Lyla’s dark curling hair. The glow around her hand tingled Lyla’s scalp like cool mint on her tongue.

Father opened the door, and Lyla immediately recognized where they were. She had never come through this way before, but she knew the round room that connected her Grandparent’s homes.

“Are we going to go see Grandma?” Lyla asked.

“Yes,” Father said. Lyla skipped along beside him across the room to the lavender door, holding his hand. The door opened before they got there, as always.

“Grandma!” Lyla yelled, letting go of her Father’s hand and running down the hallway into her Grandmother’s favorite room.

“Lyla,” Grandma said, coming forward to hug Lyla. “I didn’t know you two were coming. Lia’s not here?”

“Nope,” Lyla said with a shrug.

“What’s this about?” Grandma asked. She had loopy curls like Lyla, but they were red, not black. She didn’t look much like a normal grandma, but none of Lyla’s grandmothers did.

“We’re going to Fraizha,” Father told her.

“But the only way to Fraizha is through the Void... are you going to make a portal?”

“No. I think Lyla will find it exhilarating, actually.”

Grandma looked worried, and went into another room. She was back a moment later with a thick cloak, and she wrapped it around Lyla, fussing with the ends until they were tucked away and her arms were wrapped up. Her expression was of concern, and Lyla giggled. This was looking to be more and more exciting.

“I don’t like this. Enna wouldn’t like this, neither would Aeyris. Isn’t she too young?”

“Lyla’s a Portal Guide, Mother, she’ll be fine. She’s basically a Fraizhan, she should see her planet at some point.”

Father picked up Lyla, holding her securely to his chest. She giggled again, wriggling in the long oversized cloak. Father pulled the hood up over her head and tucked it under his chin. For a moment, Lyla couldn’t see.

There was a jolt. Her hood was ripped away, her eyes were blasted with wind and for a brief moment she was looking into an endless distance before she squeezed them shut. Her skin burned with cold and she was immediately shivering so hard her teeth were clacking against each other. Her father held her securely, his large black wings beating a steady rhythm.

Then the coldness eased. It was still cold, but it was a mild, comfortable coolness. Lyla opened her eyes, and was astounded by what she saw.

High around her were tall icy mountains; around and below green valleys spread out like cracks in the terrain. They were on a large platform, on which several Silents were perched like predatory hawks. Lyla's eyes were wide. She had never seen so many Portal Guides in one place before. They all had oversized signature black wings, and they looked at her with the same surprise she peered at them with.

Father strode into a large cave opening ahead of them, setting Lyla down and unraveling her from the cloak. The inside was carved with pictures of people and places that swirled around her like a canvas, statues that seemed to be moving and familiar faces. Much of it Lyla recognized, she had been raised with stories of the liberation of the Portal Guides and the Ice Lizard War.

"How was that?" Father asked.

"Dark," Lyla breathed.

They had been followed, and a whole crowd of Portal Guides were watching them in fascination. Lyla stared back boldly.

"This is Fraizha," Father told her. "Planet of the Portal Guides."

"Ooh," she breathed, looking around, "I'm a Portal Guide."

"Yes. These are your people."

There was a commotion, and the Portal Guides parted to allow through a man that was younger than the rest of them. In his arms, something was moving.

"Welcome Lyla!" he said with an easy, open grin.

"Olen," Father greeted. "What have you got there?" he asked suspiciously.

"A gift for your daughter," he said, and held out his offering. "Every little girl should have a kitten."

It was flecked white and pale grey, fuzzy and blinking, hanging from the scruff of its neck. Tiny fangs peeked out over its upper lip, and it wriggled uncomfortably in the unrelenting grip of the Fraizhan holding her.

"A present!" Lyla squeaked. The kitten stopped wriggling and looked at her inquisitively pale blue eyes.

Father's hand was firm on her shoulder. "Olen..." he shook his head, "Where did you get a baby saber tooth snow tiger?"

"Caught it," Olen said smugly. "I had a... tip you were coming, and went straightaway."

"And you thought this was appropriate?"

"She's not any normal little girl. She's our kind of little girl. Of course it's appropriate."

"So you really do hear Aadon sometimes?"

Olen nodded and turned his attention back to Lyla. "It's a girl too," he said, taking a step closer and releasing the kitten into Lyla's arms.

Lyla hugged the squirming kitten, grinning so wide that her face hurt.

"Lia doesn't have a kitten!" she pointed out.

"Somehow I doubt she wants one," Father murmured.

"I will call her Snow Princess!"

Father rolled his eyes. "Alright, we'll just see what your grandmother has to say about this. Come, everyone wants to meet you."

Lyla looked into her kitten's blue eyes and hugged it to her chest.

Chapter Three: Times Change

Something rough and wet caressed the side of Lyla's face, from her chin all the way up over her eyelid.

Pause, and repeat. Something was licking her face. Lyla's eyes snapped open and focused on what was in front of her: a massive saber toothed snow tiger, many times Lyla's weight. It had giant saber canines, each as thick as Lyla's thumbs, razor sharp and long enough to extend past the tiger's delicately tufted chin.

Ten years later, the name 'Snow Princess' hadn't stuck, and Lyla's giant kitten now went by the name Snoë. Though she still thought she was a kitten, she was now large and powerful but elegant, with soft white fur spotted with grey spots. Her intelligent eyes were concerned.

Lyla was lying on her back in a hard and dark place. She couldn't remember how she had gotten there, which was never good. Lyla scowled and sat up, though her hand in discordance with her expression fondly stroked Snoë's head. Snoë was standing over her protectively with one paw on either side of Lyla's body, and took a reluctant step back when Lyla pushed on her chest, straightening out her uncomfortably cramped black wings.

Lyla curled her legs under her and rested her forehead briefly against Snoë's furry shoulder, trying to recall what had happened. She remembered being prickly and uncomfortably hot. She also knew what room she was in.

The bad room. The Cursed room.

The door wasn't barred; thankfully Lyla was spared that indignity. There was a click from the other side and as it swung open Lyla tried to compose herself, but then relaxed to see her cousin James in the doorway.

Her cousin and grandfather.

James was the family secret. He had grown up many years ago in the Pit with his family, and lived a normal life. He died when Lyla's father

was a baby, died from grief the way that the Silents went. He had lingered in the place they called Hell, waiting for his family, but he had the opportunity to fight Intuition in the Ice Lizard War and he took it. In reward for his courage and to help Lyla's uncle Alexander, whose mind had been damaged by Intuition, they had let James inhabit Alexander's body. Alexander healed eventually, though he was never quite normal again.

James would have returned to Hell except for one thing. Alexander and the rest of the family were unwilling to let him go, and ready to do anything to spare him the torment of an unresolved afterlife. So another deal with the Gods had been made.

Uncle Gray and his wife Sariah had consented for James to be reborn as their child. Lyla wasn't entirely sure how it all worked out, but her Grandfather's soul had returned to the world for a second chance. James grew up as a mostly normal Silent, except he had a vague memory of his first life that became more and more clear as he became older. He didn't talk about it much and nobody knew exactly how much he remembered of living, dying, and after death. A previous life seemed a heavy thing for someone to bear.

Almost as heavy as being the only female Portal Guide... at least his past was secret, and not clear as glass for everyone to see.

James looked through the partially opened door, brows drawn together. He was a hard person to understand. On the surface he had a light mischievous nature, but there was something wise and old and somehow unmistakably mysterious about him.

Lyla smiled, and he smiled back, stepping in and offering a hand, which she accepted. He pulled her easily to her feet. James was several years older than her (in more ways than one) and had been one of her closest companions growing up.

"Alright now?" he asked.

"Was anything not alright?" she responded, hiding her uneasiness.

"You tell me."

Lyla gave up. "I didn't... do... anything this time, did I?"

He shook his head. "Oh, don't worry. You just got a little funny eyed and Aeyris decided you should go to bed."

Lyla looked behind her at the bed in the far corner. She rarely made it that far.

"Of course she did," Lyla said with a frown. Aeyris didn't like to be called Grandmother.

Lyla's bad room was several floors down and away from her family's normal chambers, where Lyla's real room was. She went there more often as she got older, sometimes needing a moment of quiet, sometimes because she felt shaky and out of control. The worst times were like this one when someone else decided she needed some alone time. Usually her time in the room was black and missing.

Lyla left gladly with one hand resting on Snoë at her side and James a step ahead.

"I should just go live on Fraizha," Lyla mumbled, catching up with her cousin.

"Aw, but think how much we would all miss you?" James said teasingly. "Especially Lia. Being twins and all, she would suffer horribly to be separated."

Lyla looked at James speculatively, weighing the irony, sarcasm and truth of his comment. She decided not to respond. It was an ongoing debate, but Enna had never consented to be separated from either of her daughters.

Once the twins were born, Enna had been given the title of Queen Daughter, and Aeyris had become Queen Mother, and they ruled jointly. What the Queens consented or didn't consent was law. Lyla was aware that sometime soon she could probably decide if she wanted to leave Origin and her family behind, but it wasn't a decision she was ready to face yet.

She would be the only female there, which would probably be as weird as being the only Cursed in the Pit. Having people stare at her for being something strange, one of the fabled Cursed, a frightening and unwanted princess. At least Lia, who had a personality and willpower of a wet blanket, had more hope than Lyla did. When Lia met her Portal Guide soul mate, he would balance her and free her from her personality disorder. Then she could travel, become Queen, anything.

For Lyla there was nothing. She had no counterpart. There were no male Healers to balance her temper and her blackouts. It was either retreat to Fraizha permanently and leave everything she knew behind, or live with it.

"I went to Fraizha once, you know," Lyla said aloud.

"Ya?" James said questioningly, even though he did. He knew most things about Lyla, he knew her better than anyone.

"It was a beautifully cold world," she explained, "Like living in ice cream."

"Never should have introduced you to ice cream," James said with a grin, "It's an obsession." Lyla liked ice cream, despite the fact that it melted into puddles in her hands because of her unusually high body temperature.

They came into a large room with two side by side desks, and many cushy sofas and chairs. It was the personal office of the co-ruling Queens, and the extra furniture was for family members. Mother had insisted.

Aeyris was behind her desk, and Mother sat on a couch with her arm around Lia, who was surprisingly present. Physically, anyway, she had a pretty vacant expression. Lia did warily note the entrance of Snoë. Snoë had stalked Lia's childhood nightmares, and probably still did. In many ways, Lia was like a child. Lyla didn't connect with her twin in the way she did with James, but Lia felt strongly about Lyla and this made Lyla protective of her sister. Lyla looked forward to the

day Lia met her soul mate and became a 'real person' both with anticipation and envy.

"Aeyris, Mother, Lia," Lyla greeted them.

"I hope you're back to rights," Aeyris said mildly. "You spooked several visiting dignitaries."

Lyla blinked and didn't respond. She and Aeyris were hardly close.

"I'm glad to see you're feeling better," Mother said softly, and smiled. Lyla couldn't help smiling back. The Queen Daughter had a serene presence about her, something just as remarkable but kinder than Aeyris' demeanor.

"You were saying, about Fraizha?" James prompted her.

"Oh. It was nice." Lyla couldn't help smiling at him as she added. "I remember Grandmother, too. She had this... glow about her."

Aeyris looked at her skeptically. "A glow? Don't be silly. Besides, your other grandmother died when your father was one year old. You didn't know her. You have such an imagination, child."

Lyla scowled. She was hardly a child. People were always telling her she had a powerful imagination. They said it so much that Lyla stopped talking about the memories from her childhood, of strange, magical places and beautiful glowing people. She didn't want to hear that she was just making it up, even if she was. Most likely her early childhood in the Pit had been so dull that she had made up a more interesting one as a survival mechanism for her sanity.

Mother didn't comment, though James stepped back into the doorway, a disapproving frown on his face. Lyla wondered what thoughts were behind that expression.

Father was absent from the Pit. He was sometimes gone for long periods of time, before showing up again as if he had never left. Lyla missed him and was bitter about his absence simultaneously.

Sometimes Lyla felt that things had been better once, that she hadn't always been confined in this place with these people. Maybe she had been happy then.

"I'm going on a trip," James said suddenly. "I wanted to ask if Lyla could come with me."

Lyla's mood immediately brightened. She rarely got to leave the Pit, and James was her favorite companion. Where would he be going?

That's what Enna asked, and Aeyris peered at him intently awaiting the answer. She didn't often tell James what to do. He was obviously wise beyond his years, and despite his outward appearance, a grandparent like her. In addition, it was likely he wouldn't listen to her anyway. Aeyris had ceded her control over him, but she was fiercely dominant over her family members, especially when she feared their safety.

"The Fraizhan Contact Center. I want to fly there. With Lyla, perhaps we could port part of the way."

Lyla was even more excited. Living in the Pit, where it was impossible to port, she rarely had the opportunity to practice.

"Will Harry be there?" Enna asked. Lyla's mother had long ago accepted that her husband wasn't the kind to be kept in one place, and since she had an Empire to rule they were often separated. Whenever he was on the planet they could speak mind-to-mind, but when he was somewhere else she couldn't always communicate with him.

"I don't know," James said, "but Alexander will be."

"Ah, I see," Aeyris said. Nobody even attempted to understand the bond between James and Alexander, Uncle and Nephew, who had shared a body for nearly three years. "I suppose Lyla could use some fresh air. What do you think, Enna?"

This was code for Lyla needing to relieve some energy and stress. Lyla didn't like the feeling that she needed to be 'managed' by her grandmother.

Enna nodded. "If it's what you would like, dear," she told Lyla, who nodded, smiling sideways at James.

"Then we'll leave right away? I'll go tell my parents," James said, and disappeared back into the hallway. Lyla rushed forward and gave her mother a small hug before nodding goodbye to her grandmother and hurrying to catch up. He was waiting on the ledge of the Pit. Lyla quickly leaned down to give Snoë a kiss on the top of her soft head and the big cat turned around and padded away. Snoë could amuse herself.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Lyla asked, hopping off the ledge and catching herself on her black feathery wings with the ease of practice.

He grinned. "Just a surprise. Come on, let's go."

James would never have left the Pit without checking with Lyla's Uncle Gray and Aunt Sariah first. James had a little sister, Daviah, who wasn't much more than a baby. Sariah's mother Arinah had been a healer, well known for her beauty, and originally they had debated naming the new baby after her, but Sariah had decided naming one child after a grandparent was enough. Lyla had the feeling that Arinah wasn't a comfortable subject for Sariah.

Gray was sitting on the floor, Davi on his lap trying to pluck out his eyebrows. Sariah was at a table with Lexian, Lyla's grand-uncle and Gray's father.

"She's clearly taking after me," James said. "Wait until she's a little older. I'll teach her how to pick locks and fill her head with ideas and you'll never have a quiet moment again."

Gray groaned. "Just when we're finally getting rid of you," he said jokingly.

“James,” Sariah said, coming and pulling him into a hug. James warmly returned it.

Lyla stayed by the door, observing. Sariah saw James as her son, one with extra memories but one who was her son non-the-less. She had carried him within her, given birth to him and raised him as her child before he ever began remembering who he had been before. James clearly regarded her as his mother and never held back any affection. Lyla wondered how well he remembered his first mother, and if it was strange having had two childhoods. No doubt.

Lexian nodded in greeting. “James,” he said with a private smile. To Lexian James was Jaim, the older brother he had always looked up to. The body he was in made no difference. Apparently James looked almost exactly like he had the first time around, except instead of dark brown wings his were dappled gray like his second father. His features were slightly different due to his new heritage, but the family resemblance was extremely close. He was, after all, his own great uncle.

To Gray, James was both. He treated James with both the affection of a son and the respect of an adult. But then again Gray always understood things better than most people did.

James was mostly happy, Lyla could tell by his familiarity with his family and his comfort in his home. She wondered if that’s all he ever planned to do, live in the Pit with his family, or if he had other goals.

She also knew she didn’t know the whole story. James was mysterious. Lyla never asked; she liked him that way.

James quickly explained where they were off to and why, and he retrieved a cloak and said goodbye to his family. Davi, not understanding, gave him a scowl.

Lyla didn’t need a cloak, she was always warm. Together she and James flew up through the Pit. The common Silents, recognizing her, got out of her way. Lyla kept her face blank. She always hid her feelings, if she looked annoyed or frustrated they would only be more

afraid of her. Lyla was sure, like Aeyris, they secretly thought there was no chance she would ever be Queen.

Supposedly, nobody knew which of the twins had been born first. The story was that they had been so identical at birth that nobody knew which was which for some time, or who was older. Lyla didn't really buy it. If her parents went along with the story, it's because they didn't think it mattered, or because they wanted their girls to be equal. If Lia had been born first and Aeyris knew, she would have made sure everybody knew who the heir was. But if Lyla had been born first... she probably wouldn't want anyone to know.

Lyla shared her thoughts with James, as they rose up through the hole of the Pit and into the crisp night air.

He was thoughtful and silent for a few moments. "I don't know," he said finally. "I was too young at the time to understand anything going on. I remember when you two were babies though. You really were identical. It took almost two years for you to look different. Who knows, maybe you were actually meant to be named Lia and you got switched." He smiled briefly. "If Aeyris could see your potential, she would think twice before counting you out as Queen."

"A Cursed Queen?" Lyla repeated. "It's never going to happen. I don't think Aeyris or the people would ever let it happen."

James didn't argue her point. He looked peaceful, looking forward to his meeting with Alexander, so Lyla let him be. They flew onward through the darkness in companionable silence.

Author's Note: Things have gotten considerably darker, haven't they? Lyla was a carefree and happy child, but life in the Pit has made her pretty lonely and miserable.

I wanted to let everyone know the reason I haven't posted in a while: I had a rough summer. I ruptured a disk in my back and needed spine surgery. I also got into a car accident on the freeway which totaled my car. So I've been recovering from surgery and doing physical therapy but I hope to get back to some writing. Thanks for waiting!

CHP04